

## Humanistic Rabbi Shines a New Light on Hanukkah

By [Holly Robinson](#), Contributing Writer  
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When a congregation based in White Plains, New York invited a rabbi/musician to help them celebrate Hanukkah this year, they discovered he would be sharing more than songs about *menorahs* and *dreidels*. "Rabbi Tom's approach encompasses a lot more than his music," noted Terry Toll, the congregation's event coordinator. "It's our custom to weave different Jewish traditions into our celebrations – but the ideas he's planning to present suggest that this Festival of Light will be quite illuminating."

Rabbi Tom Heyn was ordained seven years ago from the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati where he stayed on to work as a chaplain in a Jewish nursing home and help raise his three boys. In what hours remained, he worked hard to refine his musical skills, broaden his repertoire of Jewish music, and deal with what he says felt like a spiritual crisis.

Then his life and career took an unexpected turn after an awakening of sorts. Now busy with a hectic tour schedule, Heyn visits congregations in search of what he calls an 'Integral' approach to Judaism.

Dr. Elin Poneman, a hospice-physician living in Larchmont, New York, found Rabbi Heyn on the internet last year when she was looking for a rabbi to conduct a humanistically-framed *Bnai Mitzvah* service for her twin sons. "We were astonished," she recalls. "He didn't say anything then about his philosophy, but it was clear he could bring people together from very different religious backgrounds. I'm thrilled he's coming back on behalf of our congregation."

Poneman's congregation is the Westchester Community for Humanistic Judaism ([www.WCHJ.org](http://www.WCHJ.org)), a group that has been reaching out to Westchester Jews for almost five years. WCHJ is one of thirty other small congregations that are affiliated with the Society for Humanistic Judaism ([www.SHJ.org](http://www.SHJ.org)), headquartered in suburban Detroit.

"Humanistic Jews celebrate the many aspects of Jewish culture that affirm its inherently humanistic values," explains Rabbi Miriam Jerris, who serves as the Society's community development coordinator. "We believe that a person does not have to recite traditional prayers or practice traditional rituals in order to be authentically Jewish." Heyn was attracted to the group's inclusive philosophy and joined Congregation Beth Adam, a humanistically-oriented synagogue in Cincinnati where he now serves as Music Director.

The movement in religions toward more



complex, rational ways of thinking is nothing new. It was advanced significantly in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century CE by the early founders of the Reform Movement and, soon after, by Rabbi Mordechai M. Kaplan, whose work

became the basis of the Reconstructionist movement. Starting in 1909, when he began teaching rabbinical students for the Conservative Movement at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, Kaplan sought to 'reconstruct' the foundations of Judaism by reinterpreting prayers and rituals that made reference to traditional God-concepts.

In the late 1950s, Rabbi Sherwin Wine took the idea in a different direction. Instead of retaining and reinterpreting Judaism's traditional God-language, which for many had become problematic, he decided to write his own liturgy. As Rabbi Miriam Jerris put it, "Instead of saying one thing and meaning another, he inspired us to read and sing about what we could positively affirm." In 1963 Wine founded a humanistic congregation and soon after established the Society for Humanistic Judaism.

After considering the evolution of these separate movements, Heyn came to understand it in relation to a process much broader in scope. "In some circles," he adds, "it's recognized as an evolution of consciousness, but we can save that for another article." Although he's an ordained Reform rabbi, Heyn now describes himself as a Humanistic rabbi as well as an Integral rabbi. "I think each description transcends and includes the one that came before it. On that basis, you could say that an Integral approach is trans-denominational."

The word 'transdenominational' puts Heyn in a class of rabbis who have defined themselves, and the organizations they represent, as such. For example, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, who is credited with having founded the Jewish Renewal movement in the 1970s, probably coined the term himself. Today he is working closely with the Integral Institute ([www.integralinstitute.org](http://www.integralinstitute.org)) in Boulder, Colorado to develop a program of study called 'Integral Kabbalah.' Brandeis University professor Arthur Green, a world-renowned scholar in the field of Jewish mysticism, oversees a

rabbinical studies program at the Hebrew College in Boston that is.....– you guessed it – 'transdenominational.'

Hundreds of other rabbis, many of whom have been profoundly influenced by these two leaders in particular, are actively implementing a transdenominational approach in congregations around the world. But so far, only a handful have openly described their approach as Integral. One of them is Rabbi David Ingber, who founded the Upper West Side congregation *Kehilat Romemu*. The congregation is described on its website ([www.romemu.org](http://www.romemu.org)) as both 'transdenominational' and 'integral.'

Could this be the beginning of an 'Integral' denomination within Judaism?' Heyn shudders at the idea. "The last thing we need is another denomination. What's needed instead is for people to think about what separates one denomination from another." He believes that the dynamics of the Jewish community are driven largely by ideas that operate in the realm of the subconscious.

"An Integral approach encourages us to examine those ideas because they profoundly shape our lives and our world. Meditation can help to cultivate the stillness of mind needed for this task." But Heyn says it also helps to have "a more comprehensive, holistic view of the inner and outer dimensions of the human experience. In other words," he explains, "if you want to know where you're standing, it helps to have the best GPS technology on the market, or at least a good map."

Heyn admits it's difficult to explain the Integral approach in a quick sound-byte, other than by saying that it 'integrates' insights from leading-edge sciences with wisdom gleaned from our world's spiritual traditions. Beyond that, he encourages readers to check out any of the two-dozen books published by Ken Wilber, the most prominent of Integral theorists ([www.wilber.shambhala.com](http://www.wilber.shambhala.com)). Heyn provides links to other resources as well on his own website ([www.RabbiTom.com](http://www.RabbiTom.com)).

Rabbi Heyn was in New York City last week for a first-ever "Taste of Integral Judaism" event, which he co-led with Rabbi David Ingber. Rabbi Ingber, who leads his congregation in eclectic practices and ecstatic chants, is likely to attract urban Jews somewhat familiar with – or at least comfortable with – the use of liturgy and ritual. When Rabbi Heyn returns to the suburban New York community of Westchester this weekend, he's likely to appeal to suburban Jews who, for the most part, are more secular in their orientation.

Why does Heyn think they'll be interested? "It's like electricity. I can't explain how it works, but I know how to turn on a light." He also knows how to energize a room with music. Having studied at the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University, he is an accomplished singer, songwriter, and multi-

instrumentalist.

Heyn also has experience recruiting musicians and involving them in the process of community-building. "I have a little talent and a lot of *chutzpah*," Heyn says of the qualities that have helped him infuse the Humanistic movement with a whole new spirit and style of Jewish music. During his visit to New York, he was recruiting professional-level musicians who want to join him in his efforts.

"Within another year or two," Heyn projects, "people will recognize these congregations for the quality of their music. They'll be like that restaurant where people come for the dessert. Only in this case, people will come for the music and end up staying because they like the meaning it conveys."

Rabbi Heyn will be at the WCHJ on December 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>. On Saturday (Dec 16<sup>th</sup>) from 7-10 pm, guests (and musicians) are invited to an 'Open House' in Larchmont. The evening will include a sampling of *latkes* and Hanukkah desserts followed by a live performance featuring some original music along with more familiar tunes.

On Sunday (Dec. 17) from 12-3 pm, Rabbi Heyn will participate in a Children's Hanukkah Festival & Concert at the JCC-on-the-Hudson in Tarrytown. The afternoon will include Hanukkah-related arts, crafts, and activities as well as two separate programs. At 1 pm, Rabbi Heyn will present a 30-minute musical rendition of the story of Hanukkah for children and their parents. At 2 pm, Jewish entertainer and comedian Dan Cohen ([www.DannaBanana.com](http://www.DannaBanana.com)) will perform songs and stories from his CD, *Bananukah!* The entire afternoon is free; children are encouraged to bring an unwrapped gift.

For more information on both events, call Terry Toll at (914) 834-3158 or email her at [TTollNotes@aol.com](mailto:TTollNotes@aol.com).